

The Clipper visits: Peter Smith and Campbell Smith Architects

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Clipper Contributor

The “We’re proud of Campbell Smith Architects” society will come to order – for it was recently announced that this local business, now in its 38th year, is to receive the 2018 Bulfinch Award for traditional house design. The honorands are Peter T. Smith, president; Pamela Campbell Smith, vice president; Christopher DeOrsay, project manager; and Elaine Woodgate, office manager.

Their prize-winning design is on Norton Street in Edgartown. It is in the Federal style of the mid-19th century. (The Federal style persisted in places like Martha’s Vineyard after it had gone out of fashion nearer to ever-trending cities.) This is a big deal. Peter Smith will say that he had much less to do with it than his colleagues, who nominated the firm for the award without telling him.

Having lived next door to the Smiths on Webster Road in the 1950s, my father took lifelong joy in Peter’s accomplishments, as do I. “Webster Road?” the cartographer asks. Yes. Webster Road went up the sand-girt hill from Cedar Street, past the home of the Clarence Smiths, to the Mittells’ “skunk house” before dropping into Lovers’ Lane. After the blizzard of 1978 it was abandoned above the Smith house for 35 years. Its mapping seems to have been a developer’s dream that ended with the Depression.

We kept an eye on Peter after my family moved to a place called South Duxbury. Born in 1938, he lived in the Wright Estate during World War II. He found the Wrights’ binoculars in the cupola, and in the attic just below were their bathing tanks, which became his army tanks. It was a little boy’s paradise, and Peter says that living in the Wright estate was the beginning of his architectural inspiration. Later, as a teenager, he did tracings and blueprints for the great Duxbury architect, Oliver L. Barker.

Peter’s father Clarence, who was born in 1903, was 25 when the Depression began. By 1950 he had the responsibility of three children, owned the home on Webster Road and drove a Cushman’s Bakery truck. Twelve years of the Depression may have done to young opportunity what they seem to have done to Webster Road itself. Then, as now, parents sacrificed. Peter’s mother Eleanor worked many jobs in town. She is most belovedly remembered as a longtime waitress at the Winsor House.

Peter was in the DHS class of 1956, but enlisted in the Marines before graduation. It was his service in the Marines – seven years in all, four on active duty – that made a man out of him. More than one commander spotted a good mind. Orders were issued to get his high-school equivalency degree and to take college courses. The cost of the latter was deducted from his pay. His not using his intelligence was not an option given.

Peter returned to Duxbury in 1959 a young man with a purpose. With the late Peter Brown and the late Peter Barker (Oliver’s son, and architect of the current Town Hall) he worked and studied at the Boston Architectural Center. For the next seven years, he says, they worked for “all the big firms.” Peter continued as the main architect for the Ground Round division of Howard Johnson’s through 1979.

Campbell Smith was founded in 1980 with Pamela Campbell, whom he married that year. The firm has designed dozens of homes in Duxbury. Mr. and Mrs. Smith live in a lovely

Greek Revival farmhouse on St. George Street. Peter, it should be noted, hasn't moved far physically in his 79 years. That is because he is right where he wants to be.

Peter takes a great interest in Connemara, the Gaelic speaking part of Ireland, which he has visited many times. When he was well past the age of mastery he took up the bodhran, an Irish tambourine, and is now a champion. With two mates – one on fiddle, one on whistle – he performs nearly every week. St. Patrick's Day brought the trio to the Duxbury Senior Center and the Village at Duxbury.

The Bulfinch Award, which is given by the Institute of Classical Architecture & Art, will be presented at a formal dinner at the Harvard Club of Boston on April 28. Of the eight recipients, seven are large firms. Only one is small and community-based. Peter knows that not everyone in town likes every building the company has ever designed. "If we were only pleasing we would be doing something wrong," he says.

But everyone can be proud for Duxbury. This writer is happy for his old friend without doubting his assertion that his colleagues are primarily responsible for the award. They are: Pamela Campbell Smith, possessor of three advanced degrees and vice president of the company; Chris DeOrsay, an architect with 20 years' experience, who was primarily responsible for the design that is to be honored; and Elaine Woodgate, Campbell Smith's office manager.